

Embracing Both Light and Shadow: Spiritual Struggles and Supernatural “Messages” in Daily Life

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Brief bio: Julie J. Exline, Ph.D., is a Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Case

Western Reserve University. Her primary research interests focus on spiritual struggles and supernatural attributions, and she has served as Principal Investigator on projects funded by the John Templeton Foundation on both topics. She is a licensed clinical psychologist in Ohio and was certified as a spiritual director through the Ignatian Spirituality Institute at John Carroll University. She is a Past President of the Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (American Psychological Association’s Division 36) and was chosen to receive the Margaret Gorman Early Career Award, Virginia Sexton Mentoring Award, and William James Award from Division 36 based on her research in the psychology of religion and spirituality. She is the co-author, with Ken Pargament, of the 2022 Guilford Press book *Working with Spiritual Struggles in Psychotherapy: From Research to Practice*.

Abstract: Religion and spirituality can be powerful coping resources for many people. Yet many of us experience struggles and challenges around religion and spirituality, regardless of whether we are personally religious or spiritual ourselves. This set of talks will explore both the light and shadow sides of religious and spiritual life and suggest ways in which these might fruitfully be integrated in pastoral or clinical work. Much of the workshop will focus on spiritual struggles, such as anger at God, perceptions of demonic influence, doubts about religious teachings, moral dilemmas, and interpersonal struggles around religion. The presentations will introduce six different types of spiritual struggle, briefly review some relevant research, and discuss ways to foster growth from these struggles. The sessions will also introduce the topic of supernatural attributions: How should we interpret experiences that might seem to suggest “messages” from God, spirits of deceased loved ones, or dark entities such as the devil? We will review a variety of psychological factors that might predict these supernatural attributions, and we will also consider how mental health and religious professionals might choose to interpret such events through the lenses of mental illness, normal psychological processes, actual supernatural involvement, or some blend of these.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES: (

- Describe six common types of spiritual struggles.
- Discuss three sources of controversy around the topic of spiritual struggles.
- Highlight three ways to offer support and foster growth among people who are going through spiritual struggles.
- Identify five different types of reasons why someone might make a supernatural attribution for an event.
- Identify pros and cons of adopting the mental illness, psychological, and supernatural lenses in response to reports of supernatural “messages.”